DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 048 418 UD 011 374

AUTHOR Sedlacek, William E.; Brooks, Glenwood C., Jr.
TITLE The Importance of Social Acceptability in the Measurement of Racial Attitudes.
INSTITUTION Maryland Univ., College Park. Cultural Study Center.
REPORT NO RR-8-70
PUB DATE [Aug 70]
NOTE 8p.

EDRS PRICE EDRS Price MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS *Behavioral Science Research, *Caucasian Students, *College Students, *Group Norms, Majority Attitudes, *Racial Attitudes, Social Values, Southern Attitudes, Statistical Data

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to determine if white university students were aware of any peer group attitudes toward blacks. Student respondents to a questionnaire felt that college students do nct like racists, but a similar group of college students made negative racial responses when their attitudes were measured. The findings provided some evidence that there is a difference in what white students feel are socially acceptable attitudes toward blacks and what they actually feel. (Author/DM)

ED 048418

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UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND
COLLEGE PARK, MARYLAND

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THE IMPORTANCE OF SOCIAL ACCEPTABILITY IN THE MEASUREMENT OF RACIAL ATTITUDES

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SUMMARY

One methodological problem noted in previous racial attitude measurement has been that it appears less socially acceptable to verbalize or even to admit to oneself one's own prejudices than it has been previously. Sedlacek and Brooks provided evidence in previous research that measuring racial attitudes in a situational context may avoid this methodological problem. The purpose of this study was to determine if white university students were aware of any peer group attitudes toward blacks. A 20 item questionnaire was administered to 204 white prospective freshmen attending summer orientation at the University of Maryland. Subjects were asked to indicate how most college students felt about people with certain values rather than to respond with their own feelings. Results indicated that a racist and bigot were rated most negatively. Thus, there does appear to be less perceived social acceptance of negative racial attitudes among college students than of other values. However, when similar groups of white students at the University of Maryland were administered the Stiuational Attitude Scale (SAS) they responded relatively negatively to blacks. Thus, there is evidence for a difference in what white students feel are socially acceptable attitudes toward blacks and what they actually feel.

Methodological problems in racial attitude research have been cited by several writers. (e.g. Zavallone and Cook 1965; Sedlacek and Brooks, 1969, 1970a, 1970b; Brooks and Sedlacek 1970 and Sigall and Page, 1970) One problem of particular importance is that it appears less socially acceptable to verbalize or even to admit to oneself one's own prejudices than it has been previously (Ostrom and Upshaw, 1970). Thus, measuring "true" racial attitudes is made much more difficult. Sedlacek and Brooks (1969, 1970a, 1970b) have criticized the work of Rokeach, Smith, and Evans (1960) and others for a failure to adequately control for this positive social set. Rokeach and his collegues hypothesized that friendship selection is based on similarity and dissimilarity of beliefs rather than race. Prejudice, they indicated, is largely a result of belief congruence and not racial prejudice. However, Sedlacek and Brooks felt that the Rokeach work could be interpreted as providing subjects (Ss) with a highly emotionally bound alternative (race) and a more rational ego-defendable choice (belief in an issue). Ss then tend to run for psychological cover and choose the belief. Sedlacek and Brooks in developing the Situational Attitude Scale (SAS) have demonstrated the importance of measuring racial attitudes in a situational context to avoid the problem of S withdrawal from the measure. The purpose of this study was to determine if white university students were aware of any peer group attitudes toward blacks.

Method

Instrument:

A questionnaire was devised which contained 20 brief statements of "values" held by someone. The questionnaire was given the

innocuous title, University Student Opinion Questionnaire (USOQ) (see Table 1). The items contained the beliefs from Rokeach, Smith and Evans (1960), contemporary campus issues (developed from pilot studies by Sedlacek and Brooks) and several racial references. Ss were asked to rate each item according to how they thought most college students felt, on a five-point scale from Strongly Positive to Strongly Negative. The rating method used is similar to that employed in Thurstone's original work (Thurstone and Chave, 1929).

Administration:

Trained white graduate and undergraduate students administered the USOQ one day to 214 prospective freshmen attending a two day orientation program at the University of Maryland. The day was chosen randomly from a 40 day, all summer program. The USOQ was given along with several other instruments not directly related to race or other issues cited in the USOQ. Administration time was 5-10 minutes. The responses of 10 black students were eliminated from the study.

Subjects:

Ss were intending to enroll in a diversity of colleges and the group was 60% male and 40% female. By all external characteristics they appeared representative of the more than 4,000 freshmen attending the orientation program.

Analysis:

Mean responses to each item were computed. The most positive and negative mean responses were compared and discussed.

Results and Discussion

Table 1 shows the means and standard deviations for all items. Respondents indicated most college students felt most negatively about a racist (item 6), or a bigot (item 3), and most positively about a liberal (item 10) and someone in favor of the U.S. space program (item 14). Item 8 (someone who believes Negroes should be allowed to own homes only in certain areas) had the fourth most negative mean and item 11 (someone against interracial fraternities and sororities) had the sixth highest mean.

Since respondents said that most college students felt most negatively about racists it appears that white University of Maryland students do feel that being a racist is negatively reinforced in the student culture. However, when white students from the same culture are presented with an appropriate measure of racial attitudes they will respond negatively to blacks (Sedlacek and Brooks, 1969, 1970a, and Brooks and Sedlacek, 1970). In other words, Ss felt college students do not like racists but Ss made negative racial responses when their attitudes were measured. These results further support the contention of Sedlacek and Brooks that there is little perceived social support for expressing negative racial attitudes and that racial attitudes should be measured in context. There is also support in this study for Sedlacek and Brooks' explanation that if Ss are presented with a choice of negative alternative (racist) and one of Rokeach's beliefs (e.g., pro-labor union), Ss will tend to make the more socially acceptable response. However, in all fairness to Rokeach, his beliefs were developed 10 years earlier in a different social climate. It may be that with appropriate or more contemporary beliefs, Rokeach's results could be replicated. Another possible explanation is that Rokeach's conclusions were valid in 1960 but as beliefs associated

with race have become more socially significant, race or race-related beliefs are currently more important than some other beliefs.

It should be noted that several items which referred to race were not negatively rated (items 13, 16 and 19). The racial references in these are perhaps less emotional than racist or bigot. Thus, it could be said that if the USOQ had contained more emotional issues or beliefs, race may not have been viewed as negatively.

TABLE 1

MEANS AND STANDARD DEVIATIONS OF USOQ ITEMS* (N=204)

MEAN	SD	ITEM NUMBER
2.28	.89	1. An atheist
2.43	.86	2. Someone against socialized medicine
3.16	1.10	3. A bigot
1.73	.88	4. Someone pro-labor union
2.99	.98	5. A Communist
3.18	1.08	6. A racist
1.86	1.16	7. Someone favoring U.S. foreign policy
2.88	1.12	8. Someone who believes Negroes should be allowed to own homes only in certain areas.
1.46	1.08	9. Someone favoring premarital sex
1.06	.95	10. A liberal
2.75	1.07	11. Someone against interracial fraternities and sororities
2.12	.92	12. A socialist
2.38	1.11	13. Someone who believes there are fundamental differences between races
1.11	.97	14. Someone in favor of the U.S. space program
1.77	.72	15. Someone who smokes cigarettes
1.63	.92	16. Someone for gradual desegregation
2.22	.91	17. A conservative
1.14	.98	18. Someone favoring coed dorms
2.41	1.00	19. A black nationalist
2.84	1.15	20. Someone who feels protest is never justified

*(4 = Strongly Negative Feelings; 0 = Strongly Positive Feelings)

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